
Opening remarks by John Vickers, Chairman of the Office of Fair Trading, to an international Spam Enforcement Workshop, London

11 October 2004

Introduction

Good morning and welcome to today's Spam Enforcement Workshop – the first ever global meeting of its kind to combat an increasing global problem.

I am John Vickers, Chairman of the Office of Fair Trading. The OFT is the UK's frontline national competition and consumer authority. Our aim is to help markets – including e-commerce markets – work well for consumers. We are also current president of the International Consumer Protection Enforcement Network, which met in London last week. As ICPEN president we wanted to help bring together all of you here today, with an agenda geared to action.

Today's is a truly international event, with contributions from Japan, the Philippines, Australia, North America, Europe, and beyond. We are especially grateful to the US Federal Trade Commission for organising this event with us, and to the DTI, the OECD and the Dutch presidency of the European Union for their very practical support.

The problem

Our concern is the rising tide of unsolicited email coursing around the internet – much of it laden with fraud, deception and viruses. The fact that this is called 'Spam' apparently has origins that span the Atlantic. The American contribution came from the Minnesota-based food company whose canned spiced ham product was named 'spam' in the 1930s. The British contribution came from the monosyllabic but incessantly repetitious song in *Monty Python*, which shortage of time prevents me from performing for you now.

We are all familiar with the annoyance, invasion of privacy, and cost that Spam brings. But that is just a small part of the problem. Much Spam is a scam. Well over half is estimated to have a deceptive element. The scams are designed, for example:

- to con you to part with your money – as with lottery and prize draw scams
- to steal your identity – such as your bank details
- to hijack your modem so that it runs up vast phone bills
- to wreck your computer at home or work.

Much of this is sophisticated criminal activity.

But the cost of Spam to consumers, all the fair-dealing businesses, and the economy goes well beyond even that. For Spam is threatening the enormous potential for good that e-commerce, and the web generally, has opened up. Safeguarding that good, as well as combating the evil of the scams, is the challenge for us all.

How to solve it

The task requires us to transcend traditional organisational boundaries. Spam respects no frontiers, so the first and obvious requirement is effective international collaboration to combat it. We hope that today's event, coupled with tomorrow's best practice training seminar, strengthens the basis for that collaboration.

Second, regulators with responsibility for information, for telecommunications and for consumer protection have got to work well together. To this end, a national strategy in the UK is being coordinated, and I am particularly pleased that the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, is here to speak to you shortly.

The third key element, also evident here today, is public/private partnership. Internet service providers and others in the legitimate e-commerce industry have common cause with the general public against Spam. Part of the answer may be to develop ways for ISPs to charge for the sending of unwanted marketing email.

Finally, we must enhance consumer awareness of the dangers of Spam. Some messages are very simple:

- much Spam is a scam
- if an offer looks too good to be true, then it's probably false
- if an email looks doubtful, delete it.

We can all reduce the Spam we receive by doing simple things such as:

- using a Spam filter
- not clicking on adverts in Spam emails
- protecting our email addresses by not sharing them with people we don't know.

The combined strategy, then, must be:

- to combat the scammers
- to frustrate the scammers' route to consumers
- to heighten consumer awareness of the proliferation of scams by Spam, and of tactics to beat them.